NATION Halloween Add Topic

Is my Halloween costume offensive? What to know about cultural appropriation

Jordan Mendoza
USA TODAY

Oct. 25, 2021, 6:00 p.m. ET

DeeperDive BETA | Ask USA TODAY anything

As Americans dress up for Halloween during a year of record holiday spending, experts are saying: Be careful. Costumes might come off as racists or offensive, even if that wasn't the intent.

Mia Moody-Ramirez, director of graduate studies and American studies at Baylor University, says cultural appropriation has long been present in American history, but social media has elevated the awareness of it. In recent years, celebrities have been called out by the public for their use of cultural appropriation for Halloween.

"There's been so many events like that in the news, so I think we're at a point now where everyone has heard about cultural appropriation," Moody-Ramirez told USA TODAY. "Sometimes it's out of ignorance or innocence. But then sometimes it can be done on purpose."

The science of fear: Why do some people love to be scared during Halloween?

Best and Worst: From Reese's to candy corn, here are the most popular and hated Halloween treats by state

What is cultural appropriation?

Cultural appropriation is when someone adopts a culture that isn't their own and does not acknowledge or respect the culture being used for their own benefit, according to the Cambridge Dictionary. Examples can be hair, clothing and impersonating, like using popular African American Vernacular English terms, to fit a persona.

Moody-Ramirez said those who wish to have a cultural costume for Halloween should think twice about it. She adds it's important people actually understand

the culture and aren't attempting to profit from it, whether it be monetary or by popularity, and there are many other ways to appreciate a culture throughout the year.

"For Halloween, I think it's important just to kind of steer clear of those types of costumes," Moody-Ramirez said.

Shannon Speed, director of American Indian Studies Center at UCLA and member of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma, said rather than dressing up, people should respect and engage with communities instead, whether that be learning about their interest or needs as a community.

"There's no reason to take it for yourself," she said.

Halloween safety guide: Illustrated tips for parents, trick-or-treaters amid COVID pandemic

Why does cultural appropriation happen?

The use of costume cultural appropriation ranges all across ages, but Susan Scafidi, director of the Fashion Law Institute at Fordham University and author of "Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law," said the issue really came to light in 2015 when Yale told its students to be cautious of wearing certain Halloween costumes.

Schools like the University of Michigan Ann-Arbor have put warnings of what cultural appropriation looks like. Scafidi said the reason culture appropriation happens, but is not limited to, on college campuses is because young adults are learning to be on their own while rediscovering the joy of putting on a costume.

"There is a degree of pushing boundaries in college life," Scafidi said. "It's the same kind of mindset of 'how far can I take my new freedom?'"

Moody-Ramirez said social media has also played a huge role, positively and negatively, in cultural appropriation. On one side, social media has pointed out celebrities or people that are appropriating a culture, while on the other hand, attempting to be popular can have people attempting a new style.

"People are trying to have fresh content. When they run out of ideas, they may go and borrow from another culture," she said. "You just need to make sure that you give credit."

Examples of cultural appropriation

Dressing up in Native American attire, as well as blackface, are popular ideas of

cultural appropriation. Taking a costume and attempting to make it sexy can also be offensive.

"If there were any consciousness in this country of the huge problem of violence against Native women and the thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous women in this country, they'd have to stop and think about what putting on a sexy Indian costume might mean," Speed said.

'Sexy baby,' 'Sexy Handmaid's Tale': Have Halloween costumes gone too far?

Many celebrities have been called out for their controversial Halloween costumes, like "Real Housewives of Atlanta" star Kenya Moore wearing a "warrior princess" costume that included a Native American headdress. Actress and professional dancer Julianne Hough also received backlash in 2013 for appearing in blackface while appearing as "Crazy Eyes," the character on Netflix's "Orange is the New Black," played by Uzo Aduba.

My kid wants to wear a costume that may be offensive but doesn't know it. What should I do?

Creators of the film "Black Panther" have said children of any race can dress up like the superhero. When "Moana" was released, the voice of the titular character, Auli'i Cravalho, encouraged people to dress up as the Polynesian-based princess. But still, there has been some caution and controversy around the costumes.

Moody-Ramirez said a good tool for parents to consider is to think about all the homes their child will knock on for trick-or-treating and if one homeowner would find their costume offensive. She said just wearing the costume of a character should be good, but adding features such as blackface, different hair or putting on tattoos can be insensitive.

In addition to that, Scafidi and Speed said parents should understand why their child would want to dress up as the character and if their intentions are because they idolize the person, then it should be good. Still, even admiration still may offend someone else and it's important to be thoughtful "in a very diverse society."

"Parents can gently explain to their children, that depending on the age of the child, maybe a certain costume isn't the best choice because it might make their friends feel bad," she said. "It's never too early to learn good manners."

What popular costumes are at risk of being appropriated in 2021?

As new TV shows, movies and memes become popular each year, new costumes

that can appropriate a culture pop up. Scafidi said the popular Netflix show "Squid Game" will inspire many Halloween costumes, but there may be people that may take their green tracksuit costumes too far by "changing their features to emulate an Asian person." Similar to "Moana," Raya from the Disney film "Raya and the Last Dragon" is a popular Halloween costume that includes elements of Southeast Asian culture.

However, a Halloween costume doesn't need to be based upon a character for it to be offensive. A recent Tik Tok posted by @courtwashere showed a Halloween store selling culturally appropriating items, such as dread and afro wigs, as well as Egyptian-inspired costumes.

A recent survey on parents of children ages 0-10 by OnePoll listed Holocaust-related costumes as the most offensive Halloween costume, along with blackface, Confederate-related and transphobic costumes.